

ABORIGINAL MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE HERBERT/BURDEKIN DISTRICT :
A CULTURAL CROSSROADS?

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This lecture is based on current research into Aboriginal material culture, and inasmuch as the research is still incomplete, any conclusions offered must be regarded as only tentative. For the purpose of the lecture the term 'material culture' includes all equipment manufactured by the Aborigines, such as clothing, dwellings, domestic utensils, hunting and fishing gear, canoes and weapons. The 'Herbert/Burdekin district' includes the area between the Tully River and Mackay on the coast, and inland to the Dividing Range.

The sources of evidence consulted in this attempt to establish the nature of Aboriginal material culture in the Herbert/Burdekin fall into several categories. These include the ethnohistorical literature, consisting of explorers' journals and contemporary reports of early settlers and officials who came into contact with traditional Aboriginal society; museum and privately-held collections of Aboriginal artefacts from the area; research in allied fields, such as linguistics; and the land itself, the environment within the Herbert/Burdekin district. A fifth potential source of evidence, which in this research has as yet only been utilized indirectly, is Aboriginal informants who have some knowledge of traditional life.

From the above it can be seen that the sources of evidence available to this kind of research are more varied and in some ways less precise than those available to historians, and an attempt has been made to use the variety to overcome the lack of precision. In this case the procedure has been to take one of these sources of evidence and look for a pattern in it, then use this pattern as a model with which to test the other sources of evidence independently. If the pattern does not fit, it may have to be adjusted or the evidence reexamined; if it does fit it will provide a model for understanding other data for the area, although it may not be applicable to other areas.

i) In search of a pattern or model:

The close and harmonious relationship the Aborigines traditionally enjoyed with their environment prompted me to look first at the environment in the Herbert/Burdekin district to try and detect any significant variation which might be reflected in the material culture of the Aborigines.

The most significant feature to the north, in the area between Cardwell and the Tully River is the rain forest; to the SW of that is the Herbert gorge, in many places steep and practically impenetrable. Further south the coastal plain forms a continuum relatively easily traversed, especially by sea, with patches of closed fine forest and rain forest along the coastal highlands, in particular Mt. Spec and Mt. Elliott. Towards the west and southwest the environment is drier, gradually merging into the western plains.

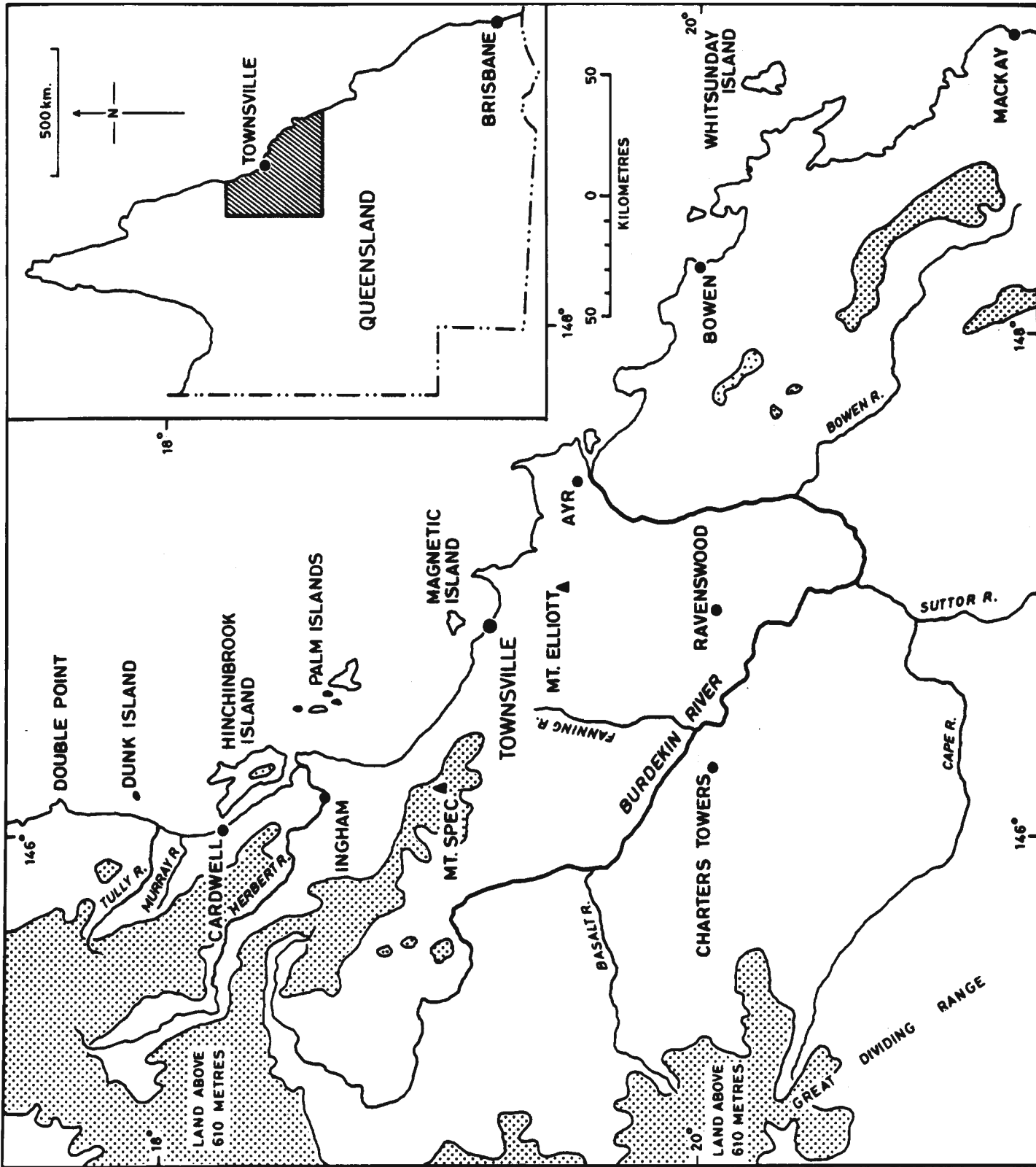
On the basis of the foregoing, on the environment and concomitant ease of communication, I postulated a hypothetical model for the variation of Aboriginal material culture in the Herbert/Burdekin district,

- a) area bounded by Cardwell, the Tully River, and eastern headwaters of the Herbert River - "Rainforest culture"
- b) coastal plain south at least to Mount Elliott - "coastal", including some rainforest elements
- c) inland, including Herbert River valley - "Burdekin culture" (which may have much in common with areas further inland).

The islands could be expected to agree most with that section of the mainland which they are closest.

ii) Testing the model against ethnohistory and museum collections - by looking at a number of types of artefacts, and plotting their distribution throughout the area. For this occasion I have selected types with the intention of conveying an idea both of the nature of the Aboriginal culture and also of the way in which the pattern does or does not apply.

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- a) Clothing. This was understandably kept to a minimum, and apart from items of personal adornment such as armbands, necklaces and sometimes feather headresses, seems to have been restricted to a blanket or rug occasionally worn over the shoulders as a shawl, more frequently used as a covering at night. Within the Herbert/Burdekin these rugs were found in two forms - possum skin and bark. Blankets of bark, removed from trees such as the fig and the tea tree, soaked in water and beaten, were in use, according to the literature, at the upper end of Halifax Bay near Ingham, on the Herbert River, on Hinchinbrook Island, on the Murray River, and further north. Possum skin rugs, on the other hand, were used in the Townsville and Ravenswood areas, on the upper Burdekin and Cape Rivers, and at Bowen.

It is unlikely that this distribution was merely a function of the source material: possums did occur in the rain forest and formed part of the diet of the rain forest Aborigines; although the fig tree was restricted to the high rainfall areas, the tea tree certainly was not. The most obvious explanation is that bark was found to be more suitable in areas of higher rainfall and greater humidity, while possum skin was preferred in colder conditions. Collections - I have been able to find no possum skin rugs from the area in museums. The Australian Museum in Sydney has a bark blanket from Cardwell, and the National Museum of Victoria has specimens from the Tully River and further north.

- b) Dwellings. It is possible that Aboriginal dwellings or 'gunyahs', as they are commonly called in the literature, represent another area of differentiation in the Herbert/Burdekin district. There are numerous descriptions of these dwellings, on Hinchinbrook Island, Palm Island, Herbert River, Cardwell, Murray River and

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further north. In all of these instances the construction is basically the same. To quote P.P. King's description of some on Palm Island in 1827:

Very snug habitations...of a circular shape and very ingeniously constructed by twigs stuck in the ground and arched over, the ends being artfully entwined so as to give support to each other; the whole was covered with a thatch of dried grass and reeds...

In other cases the leaves of banana or palm trees were used and also strips of bark from the tea tree or paper bark. In a number of instances the floors of these huts were covered with grass, and to secure them completely against rain, earth was piled up around the base, preventing seepage and providing a moat to run the water off. The door consisted merely of an opening, frequently so small that one had to crawl to get through. The huts seem to have been large enough for at least two people, with a tendency for them to increase in size towards the north.

It would seem reasonable to deduce that in areas of high rainfall Aboriginal dwellings were substantial constructions equal to withstanding the tropical wet season. It is possible that the solid construction of these huts also suggests that they were used for extensive periods of time. In the Cardwell area huts were observed to be occupied during the wet months, and also as late as June, so that for at least half the year the Aborigines were able to stay in the one place, it seems. So, substantial huts may be a function of high rainfall and of a rich environment (coastal, riverine and rainforest) enabling at least semi-permanent existence in one place.

To validate this deduction it is necessary to look at evidence of dwelling places in the drier environment to the south and west. So far I have come across only one description of Aboriginal huts in the drier region, and that is near Ravenswood,

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The...huts were formed by sticking two forked sticks into the ground, placing a sapling across, and leaning sheets of bark against them. Bushes and branches of trees were added to keep off the wind. The front...was open...the floors were covered with opossum-skin rugs.

There are a few other references to huts, for example on the upper Burdekin, but they are not described beyond the fact that most of them were unoccupied.

From this relative dearth of evidence it may be possible to infer firstly that in this area there was less use of huts, certainly from April onwards when nearly all inland exploration and travel took place. The lower rainfall and the long dry season meant that there was less need for the protection of huts. Further, the relative sparseness of the food resources required more constant travel over larger areas, so the construction of large numbers of substantial huts was impracticable. Secondly, the lean-to type of hut described at Ravenswood was very common in southern half of the continent, and as nearly all the mariners and explorers were travelling from south to north, they would have been familiar with the type. The fact that there are no really detailed descriptions of Aboriginal dwellings until the rainforest area is reached suggests that here the explorers were seeing something new. Collections - no specimens of dwellings from the area in any of the museums so far located.

- c) Shields. The rain forest shield is quite unlike any other shield used by the Aborigines, and was restricted to north-east Queensland. It was made from the flanged buttress of the rain forest fig tree. Lumholtz described the shield in use on the Herbert River:

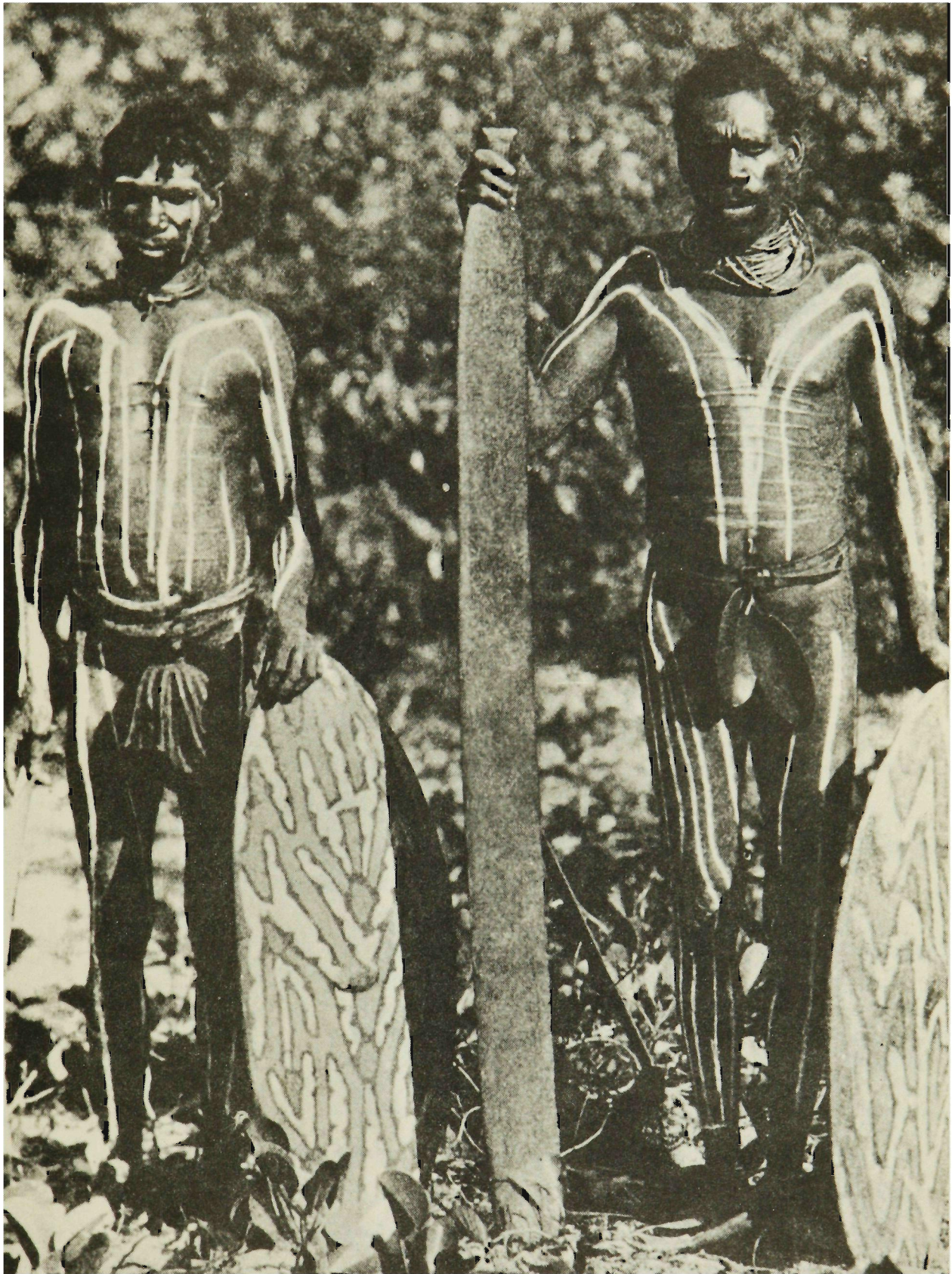
The shield, which reaches to a man's hip and is about half as wide as it is long...it is oval, massive, and slightly convex. In the centre, on the front side, there is a sort of shield-boss,

the inner side being nearly flat...The front is painted in a grotesque and effective manner with red, white and yellow earth colours, and is divided into fields which wonderfully enough, differ in each man's shield.

Further south, in the Mackay district, the shield was made from a kind of light cork tree or the kurrajong tree, and was much smaller, averaging about 50 cms in length and 22 cms in width. Whereas the rain forest shield is flat with a rounded boss in the centre to strengthen the area where the handle is carved out of the back, the Mackay shield is flat on the rear surface but quite generously rounded on the front to deflect spears and is of such sturdy construction that no boss is required. Unlike the rain forest shield, the Mackay type was decorated with incisions, and these incised areas were frequently blackened with a combination of grease and charcoal. Parts of the shield were also painted in red and white, although yellow, so much a part of rain-forest shield designs, was not used on the Mackay type.

These smaller shields appear to have been used further south, e.g. in the Rockhampton area, and their basic construction is also very similar to that of shields used in central and north-western Queensland, although decoration of the latter often included fluting as well as yellow ochre and more fluid designs.

It is apparent that somewhere between the Herbert River and Mackay there must be a region of contact or overlap of shield types. Museum collections include many specimens from both areas, but nothing in between. Their literature does suggest that the Mackay type was in use on the Cape River, a tributary of the Burdekin, but is not absolutely specific. The clearest indication comes from Meston who gives an account of an initiation corroboree held about twenty miles up the coast and from Townsville



Two Aborigines with rain forest sword and shields, Cardwell

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attended by Palm Islanders as well as mainland Aborigines. At one stage during the proceedings, says Meston,

Two grim old men stepped into the arena, and there was a buzz of eager expectation. Each carried the broad, thin flat shield, and the heavy hardwood sword.

As they advanced, each held the shield aloft horizontally, and twirled the sword rapidly round his head with the right hand. The sword cuts were received on the upper edge of the shield. Their movements were done with the rapidity of lightning, and it was really a marvellous display. Then came two warriors with small shields and nullahs.

The implication is that the two types of shields were both known and used within a small area, although as several tribal groups usually came together for big ceremonies like initiation, there is no indication which tribe used which shield, or if both shields were used in one tribe.

- d) Swords. The heavy hardwood sword to which Meston referred was as essential to the rain forest armoury as was the large shield; in fact they were used only together in ritualized duels or in battle. Lumholtz refers to the sword as the

necessary companion of the shield...about five inches wide up to the point, which is slightly rounded, and usually reaches from the foot to the shoulder. It is made of hard wood, with a short handle for only one hand, and is so heavy that any one not used to it can scarcely balance it perpendicularly with half-extended arm - the position always adopted before the battle begins.

The swords were either straight or slightly curved, depending on the tree from which they were taken, but straighter ones were preferred. Sometimes the blade was covered in red ochre, but the only other alteration was a wrapping of gum and twine around the handle to improve the grip.

Further south, in the Mackay, Broadsound, Rock-

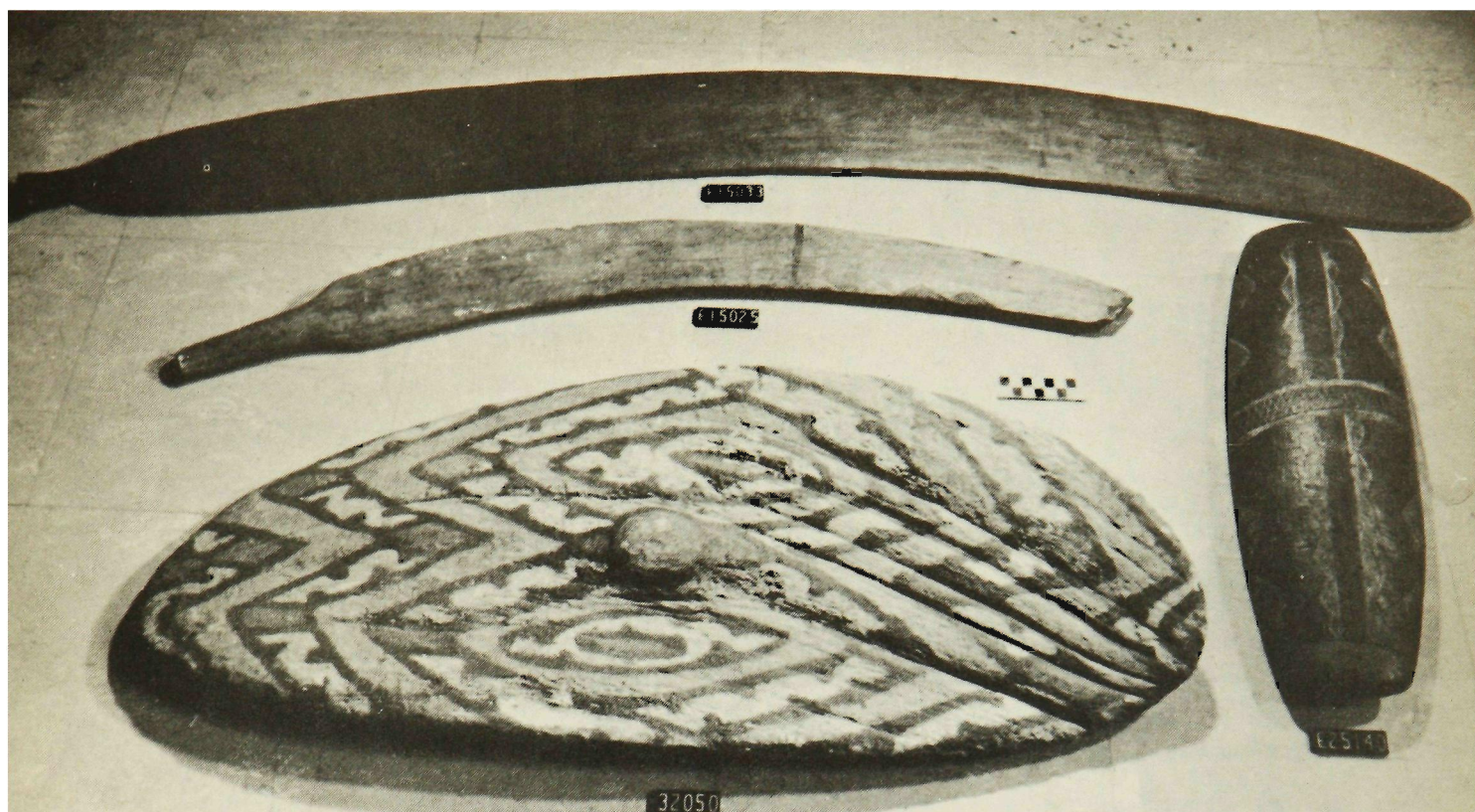
hampton area, a two-handed sword was used. This sword was always curved, and had a graduated handle which could easily be grasped in two hands. It was usually made of lighter wood, such as brigalow, and shorter, being less than a metre in length. This type of sword was also usually painted in patterns of red, white and black.

So far the literature has revealed no more about the distribution of wooden swords than about the shields. Similarly the museum collections have many rainforest specimens from Cardwell and further north, as well as many smaller swords from the Mackay area. The only item from in between is a Mackay type sword from Whitsunday Island in the Australian Museum, Sydney.

- e) Nulla-nullas, clubs. Several varieties of nulla were in use in eastern north Queensland. The most common sort, at one time to be found over most of Queensland, was about 65 cms long, globular and pointed at the far end, with parallel fluting chiselled with a stone adze along the length of it, and carving around the handle to provide a firmer grip; the whole was often covered in red ochre. The woods most frequently used for this type of weapon were gidyea, brigalow or mangrove.

A second kind of nulla was similar to the first in every respect other than the fact that it had two prongs instead of one. Both of these nullas were used for throwing rather than hitting at close quarters. The distribution of the latter nulla presents a problem. There are numerous specimens from Mackay and south to Rockhampton in museums, but none from further north, yet W.E. Roth, an extremely reliable source, reports their usage on the Tully River.

A third type of nulla, with what has been described as a pineapple head, covered in a series of wooden

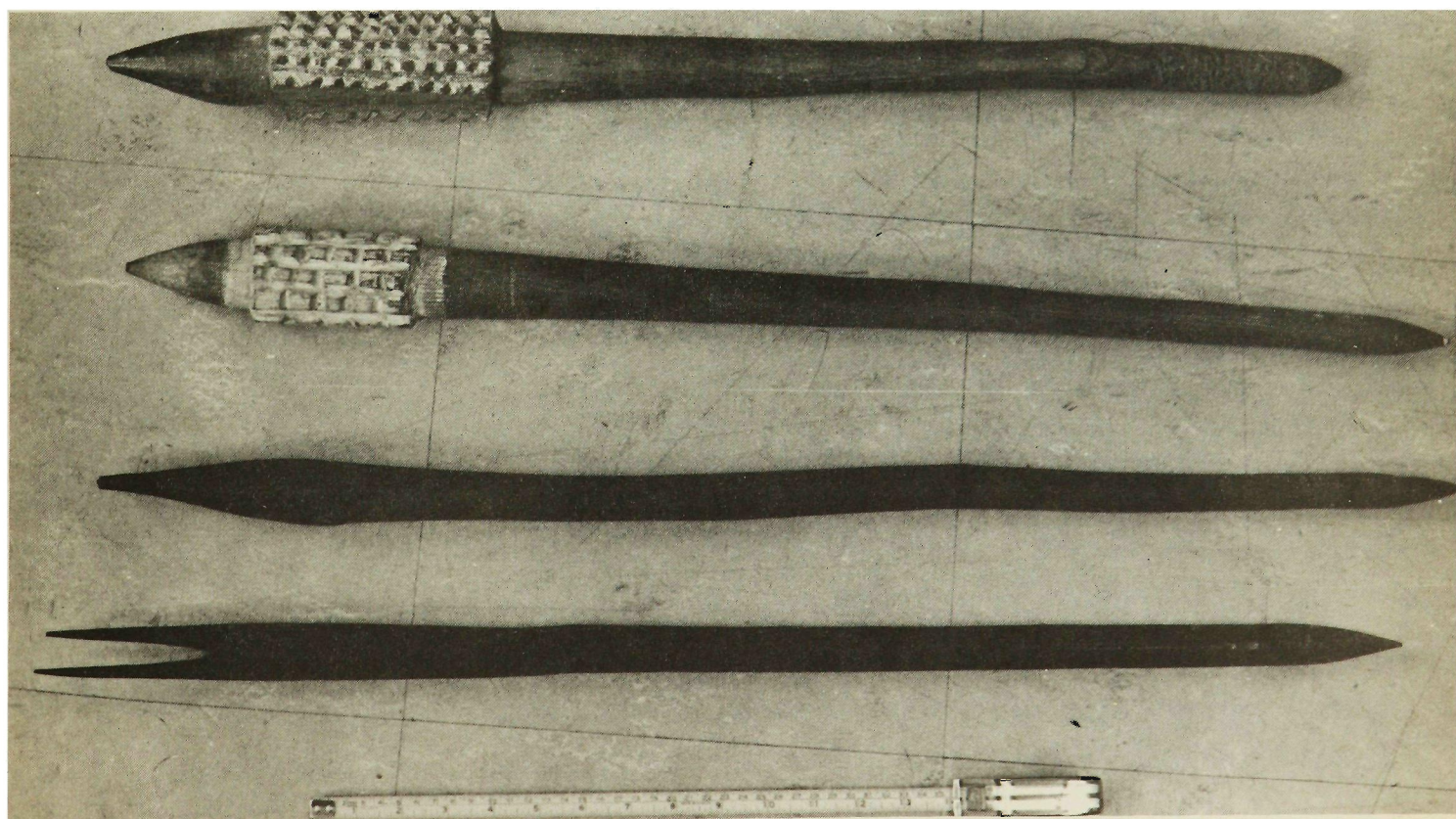


E15033 Sword, Cardwell

32050 Shield, Herbert River

E15025 Sword, Whitsunday Isl.

E25140 Shield, Mackay-Broadsound



Pineapple-type Nullas, north-east Queensland
Nulla, Whitsunday Is.
Double-pronged Nulla, Broadsound

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nodules, and used as a proper club rather than a throwing stick, did not penetrate inland at all, but occurred throughout the length of the Queensland coast. There are numerous examples in museum collections, and of these quite a few were obviously in use at the time of white contact, for instead of the nodules being carved out of the solid wood, horseshoe nails have been used and the result is a truly formidable weapon. Of this type of nulla, Roth says

Considering its limitation to the extreme north and to the coast line, and its resemblance to the pineapple stone club of New Guinea, I am inclined to regard it in the light of a Papuan introduction.

- f) Canoes. Papuan influence is also apparent in the case of Aboriginal canoes, but in this instance it does not extend right down the Queensland coast but terminates at a point somewhere within the coastal perimeters of the Herbert/Burdekin.

The typical Aboriginal canoe was constructed of bark, usually a single sheet, sometimes two or three, from various Eucalypts and Acacias. There are a number of contemporary descriptions of the manner in which such a canoe was made, e.g. south of Port Denison:

It was made from a large sheet of bark, which was first flattened out, smooth side downwards. Then the rough outside was trimmed down, and the trimmings with a quantity of dried leaves, were spread evenly over the outside surface, and set on fire. When the sheet of bark was softened by the heat, the corners were turned up, each end was doubled on itself, holes were made with a shark's tooth and awl, they were sewn with withes, and the canoe was made.

Stays were often placed across between the two sides for additional strength, and the seams caulked with a resinous gum. These bark canoes were about 2.5 metres long and 60 cms wide, sometimes much smaller. They were rarely capable of holding more than two people,

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often only one. Two small pieces of bark were used for paddling, and frequently also for bailing.

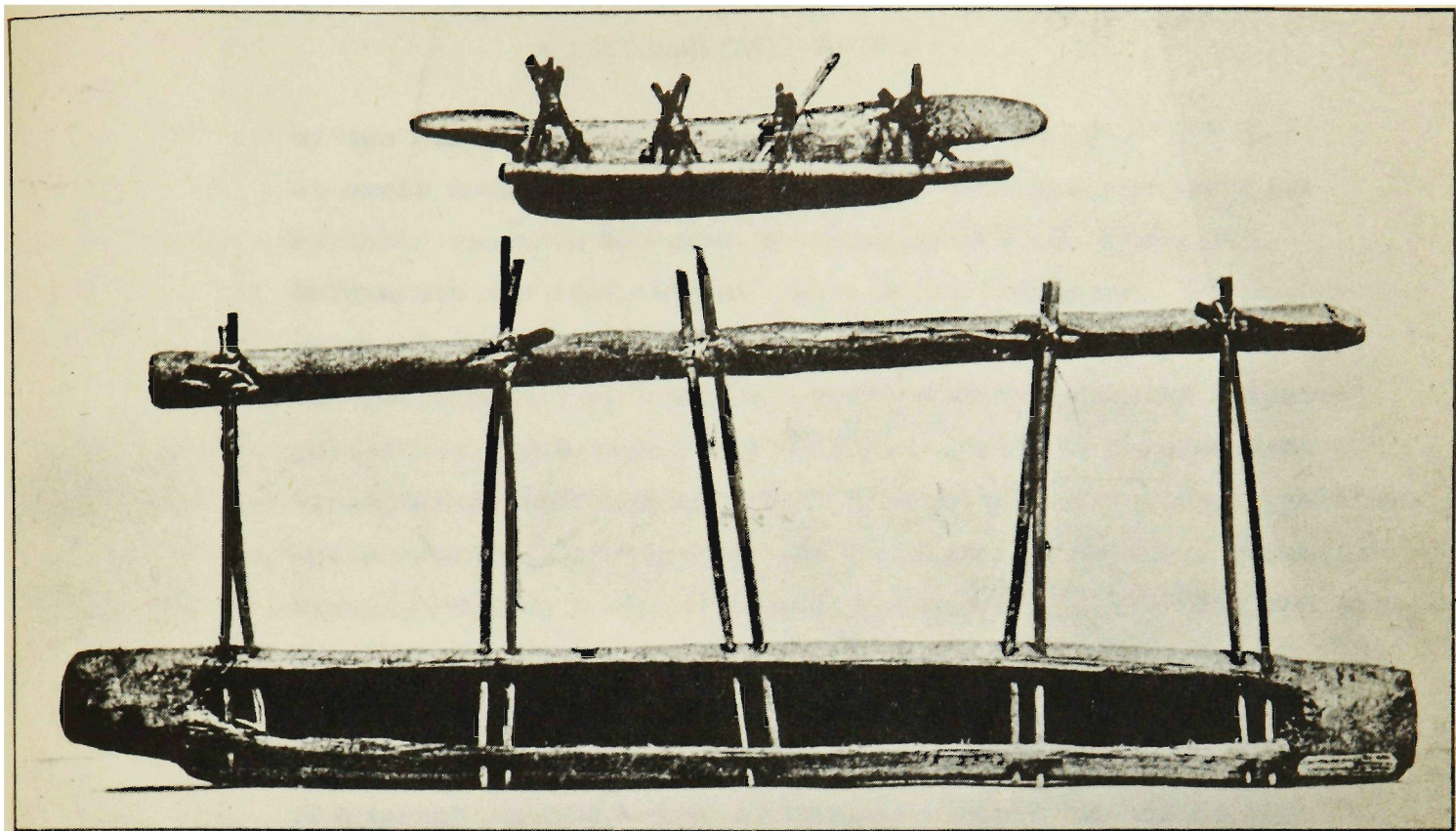
Papuan influence came in the form of the outrigger dugout canoe, which in the Torres Strait and as far south as Princess Charlotte Bay had two outriggers, but which below that had only one on the right or starboard side.

There seems to have been a considerable area of overlap of bark and outrigger canoes. Bark canoes were reported from Hinchinbrook and the southern end of Rockingham Bay, and Banfield stated that outriggers were unknown in the vicinity of Dunk Island, though twenty miles further north at Double Point "hollowed logs with outriggers of the stems of banana plants were common". Nevertheless outriggers were seen at Hinchinbrook and at Palm Island; they may have occurred even further south than that, but Roth gives the assurance that any outriggers found below Cape Grafton at 17° latitude were not of local manufacture.

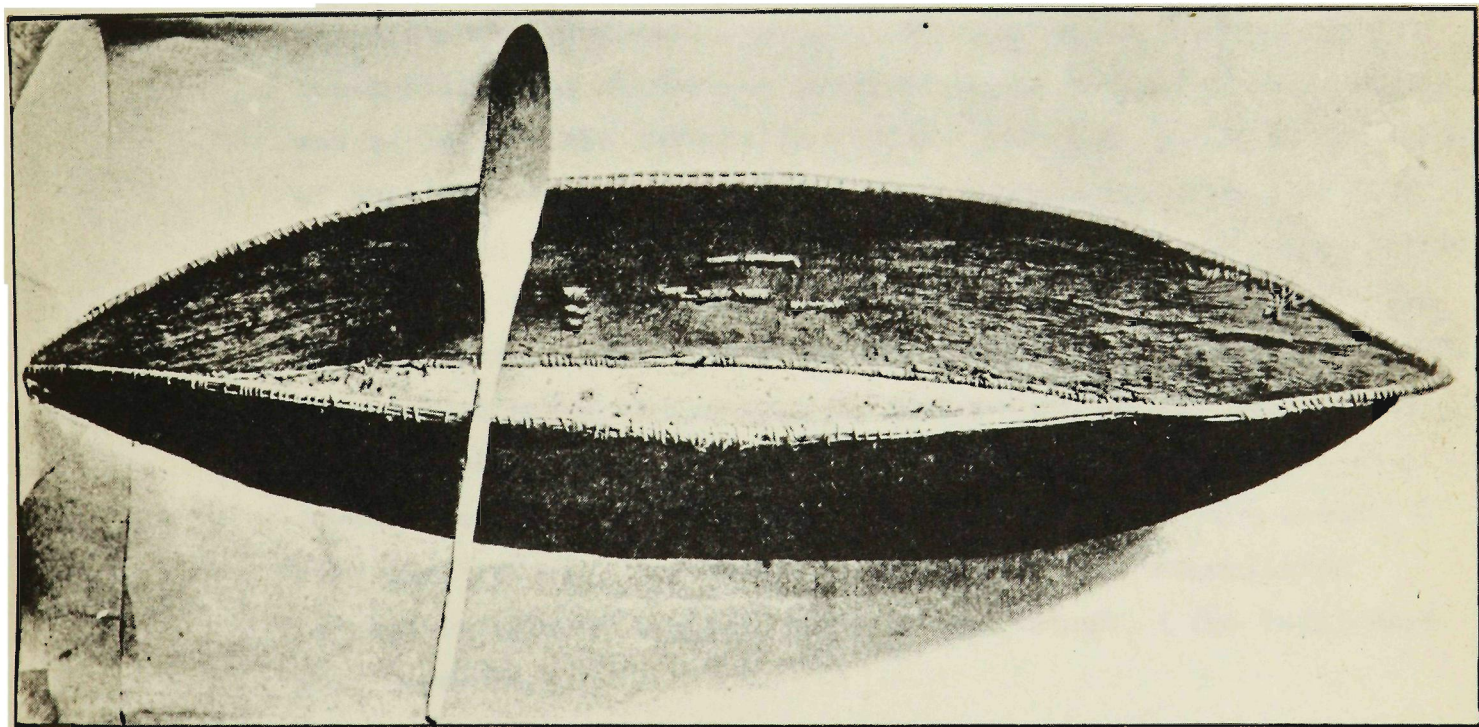
- g) Wommerahs, spearthrowers. These were in use north of the Herbert River, in the Cardwell - Tully rainforest region, and also on the Burdekin in the vicinity of Charters Towers. Once again, however, there appears to be a distinct cultural break within the Herbert/Burdekin, for wommerahs were not used on the coast south of Townsville to Rockhampton at least, and possibly as far south as Brisbane. Inland it may be possible to pinpoint one place of cultural differentiation. On the Cape River, a tributary of the Burdekin, south west of Charters Towers, the local tribe of Aborigines were reported as not using the wommerah themselves, but having a word for it in their language, and knowing their neighbours used it.

iii) Testing the model against research into Aboriginal languages.

This work has been undertaken by R.M.W. Dixon and P.J. Sutton



Canoe with single outrigger, Cairns



Bark canoe, Port Denison

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of the Australian National University. They have looked at early vocabulary lists, but by far the greatest emphasis of their research has been on interviews with Aboriginal informants who still speak their native language. The picture which emerges is a complex one. In the upper Tully region of the rainforest proper was a closely related group of dialects collectively referred to as Dyirbal. South to Cardwell and Hinchinbrook the languages were similar but less closely related, while Nawaygai, spoken near the mouth of the Herbert, was also closely related to the dialects spoken at Cleveland Bay and on Magnetic and Palm Islands. This coastal continuity appears to have extended to about Bowen, where another series of language began. Further inland there was a distinct break between the rainforest languages and the language spoken on the Herbert River, namely Warungu, which was part of a Burdekin group of languages and related to others further to the south west.

iv) Testing the model against another data in the environment.

In this case two types of data will be considered, namely rock art and archaeological evidence. The Aboriginal rock art may substantiate the pattern or model in terms of both subject matter and style. In the Townsville region there are many representations of shields, and by studying the patterns closely it may be possible to determine from the rock art the location of the southern perimeter of the rainforest shield. Stylistically the rock art in the Herbert/Burdekin falls into several categories. These include stencils of hands and weapons on tributaries of the Burdekin to the north and west; linear outlines such as the shields in the Townsville area or simple anthropomorphic figures like those near the Fanning River west of Townsville; and naturalistic representations of dingoes found on the fringe of the rainforest near Cardwell.

Exploitation of the archaeological evidence will involve plotting

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the distribution of surface campsites to determine whether the model of cultural variation applied to the Aborigines' use of stone tools, and excavation to determine whether the postulated cultural variation had any time depth.

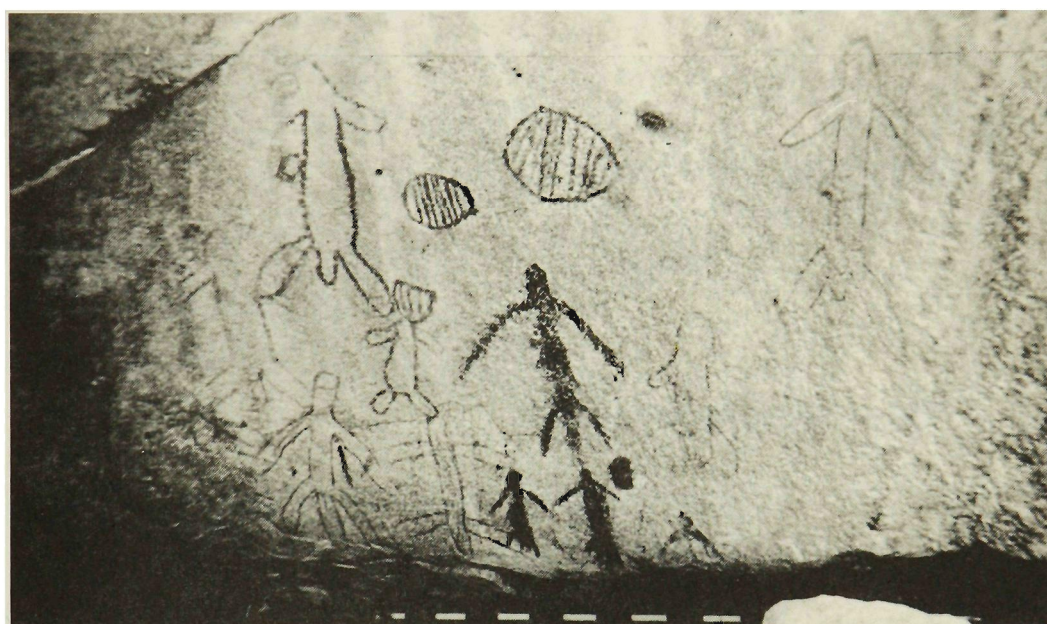
Only selected elements of Aboriginal material culture in the Herbert Burdekin have been discussed, but it is hoped that testing of the model in the manner illustrated will provide a means of arranging and interpreting further information from the area. At this stage of the research, however, it is not possible to offer any definite conclusions about the nature of cultural variation in the Herbert/Burdekin district.

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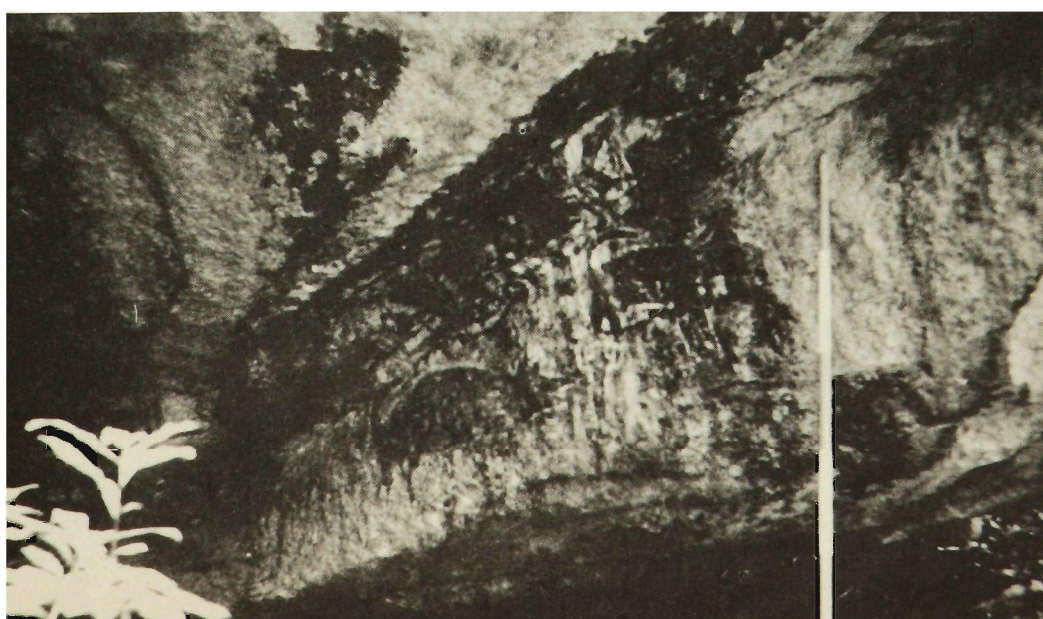
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Fanning River



Kennedy

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